

# Untold Stories of D-Day

For tens of thousands of Americans stationed in England in the spring of 1944, France was the Far Shore, the place where they would finally meet the Nazis in a fight to the death. To prepare, they trained along a stretch of English coast that had been cleared of civilians. It was called Slapton Sands, a tranquil beach that was chosen for its geographic similarity to the coast of Normandy. Their most realistic training was Exercise Tiger, a live—ammunition D-Day rehearsal that involved some 300 ships and 30,000 men in April 1944, six weeks before the invasion.



Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of Operation Overlord (Allied code for the invasion itself), was aboard an observers' ship on April 27, when Exercise Tiger went terribly wrong—failed air cover, late landing craft, confusion on the beachhead. Amphibious tanks heading to shore, misfired their guns and wounded soldiers on the beach. At least one of the tanks sank in choppy seas while its frantic crew managed to escape. Furious, Eisenhower returned to his headquarters, deeply worried about what the exercise augured for D-Day. Worse was yet to come. Around 2 a.m., on April 28, nine German *Schnellboote*—fast, elusive torpedo boats—pounced on a line of eight U.S. tank-landing ships, or LSTs. They were churning down the English coast toward Slapton Sands, fully loaded with vehicles and men who were to land in the next phase of Exercise Tiger. German torpedoes struck three LSTs at the end of the line. *LST-531* capsized and sank within minutes, taking hundreds of men down with her. The torpedo that hit *LST-289* crumpled her stern, but she stayed afloat and made it to port. Gasoline aboard *LST-507* exploded and set the ship afire.

Eugene Eckstam, a medical officer on the 507, raced for the tank deck, which was filled with men and vehicles. "I saw only fire—a huge, roaring blast furnace," he later wrote. "Trucks were burning; gasoline was burning; and small-arms ammunition was exploding. Worst of all were the agonizing screams for help from the men trapped inside. . . . But I knew there was no way I—or anyone else—could help them. I knew also that smoke inhalation would soon end their misery, so I closed the hatches into the tank deck and dogged them tightly shut?"

Senior officers ashore, quickly assessing the damage, ordered the five surviving LSTs to continue steaming toward Dartmouth, their destination. Capt. John Doyle, commanding officer of *LST-515*, the lead ship, disobeyed the order. He turned back to look for survivors. "We started looking for the ones who were still alive," Brent Wahlberg, 515 gunnery officer, remembers. "We found 132 survivors." Many of the dead, they noticed, were floating head down, feet up, with their life belts inflated. No one had told them that the life belts were to be worn under the armpits, not around the waist. That lesson from Exercise Tiger would be taught to invasion troops, saving countless lives.

In the meantime, Eisenhower had an intelligence nightmare on his hands. To keep the disaster a secret, he ordered extraordinary measures and kept the lid so tight that the details remained unknown for many years. He did not want Germany or Allied troops to know about the huge loss of life - 749 sailors and soldiers by final count. Of even greater concern was the possibility that the Schnellboote might have picked up survivors who carried the most closely guarded secret of the war in their pockets—the location of the D-Day landing.

**ONE SIMPLE WORD, BIGOT**, is stamped in big letters across the Operation Neptune Initial Joint Plan of February 12, 1944, and from then until June 6, that stamp appeared on all supremely secret pieces of paper handled by D-Day planners. If any of those papers or maps had fallen into enemy hands, the invasion would have failed or been scuttled—a distinct possibility in the anxious days after Exercise Tiger.

BIGOT was a code word within a code word, a security classification beyond Top Secret. When planners adopted Neptune as the code word for the naval and amphibious aspects of the invasion, they realized that greater protection had to be given to any document or map that even hinted at the time and place of D-Day. They chose the odd code word BIGOT by reversing the letters of two words—To Gib—that had been stamped on the papers of officers going to Gibraltar for the invasion of North Africa—in November 1942. Those who were to get date-and-place information were given special security background checks. If they qualified, they were, described as "Bigoted?" So when Eisenhower learned about the catastrophe off Slapton Sands, he wanted to know whether any of the dead or missing had been Bigoted. About ten men had. Those bodies were found and their documents collected. But had the Germans found any secrets on other bodies? Allied code breakers, who eavesdropped on German communications, listened for day to determine whether the Germans had gained any new intelligence about D-Day. They had not. D-Day's secrets were still safe.

The BIGOT maps and documents were created in isolated cocoons of secrecy. One was hidden in Selfridges department store in London; BIGOT workers entered and left Selfridges by a back door, many of them knowing only that they were delivering scraps of information that somehow contributed to the war effort. Others with BIGOT clearances worked on Allied staff scattered around London and southern England. So restricted was the BIGOT project that when King George visited a command ship and asked what was beyond a curtained compartment, he was politely turned away because, as a sentinel officer later said, "Nobody told me he was a Bigot."

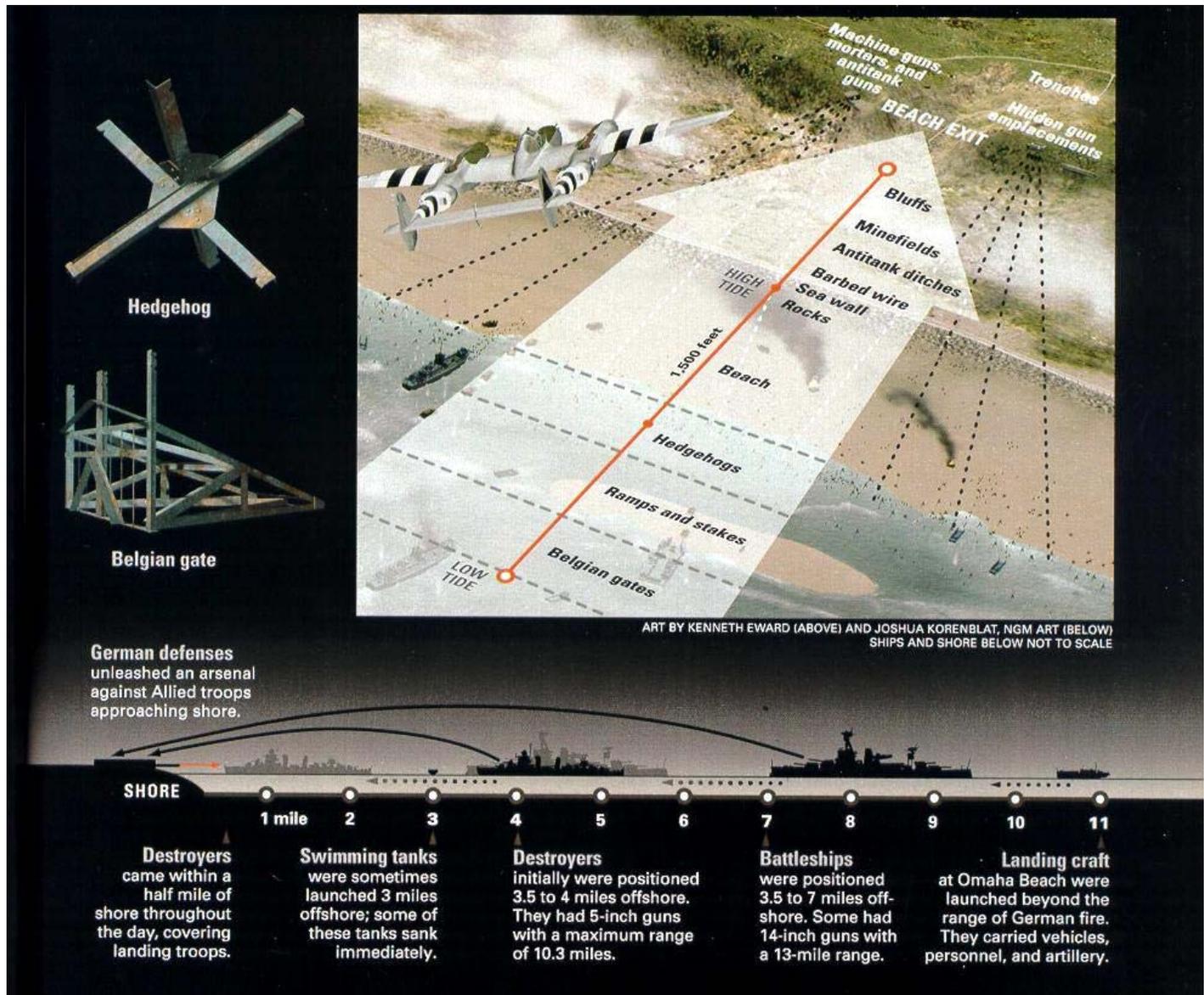
The system occasionally broke down. In March 1944 a U.S. Army sergeant accidentally sent a package of BIGOT papers, some containing the target date and place of the invasion, to his sister. The family was of German descent, and the sister lived in a German section of Chicago. By chance the package broke open in a Chicago post office. Postal authorities saw BIGOT and Top Secret stamped on documents and called the FBI. Investigators cleared the soldier of espionage, though he was confined to his quarters until after D-Day. The FBI put everyone who had seen the papers under surveillance. Another serious breach came in May when a U.S. major general told guests at a London dinner party that D-Day would come before June 15. He was demoted

and packed off to the United States, as was a Navy captain who had blabbed too much at another party.

The strangest breach of security came from the London *Daily Telegraph*, whose crossword puzzles alarmed BIGOT security officers. One puzzle, on May 2, included “Utah” in its answers. Two weeks later, “Omaha” appeared as an answer. The puzzles author, a schoolmaster, was placed under surveillance. Next came “Mulberry,” code name for artificial harbors that were secretly being built in England for use off invasion beaches. Then came the most alarming answer of all: “Neptune.”

This time the schoolmaster was arrested. Confounded investigators finally decided that the words had been the product of an incredible series of coincidences. Not until 1984 was the mystery solved: One of the schoolmaster’s pupils revealed that he had picked up the words while hanging around nearby camps and eavesdropping on soldiers’ conversations. He then passed the odd words onto his unwitting schoolmaster when he asked his pupils to provide ingredients for his crosswords.

But nothing was ‘more secret—or more vital to Operation Neptune—than the mosaic of Allied intelligence reports that cartographers and artists transformed into the multihued and multilayered BIGOT maps. On them were portrayed details of Hitler’s vaunted Atlantic Wall, a network of coastal defenses designed to repel invaders.



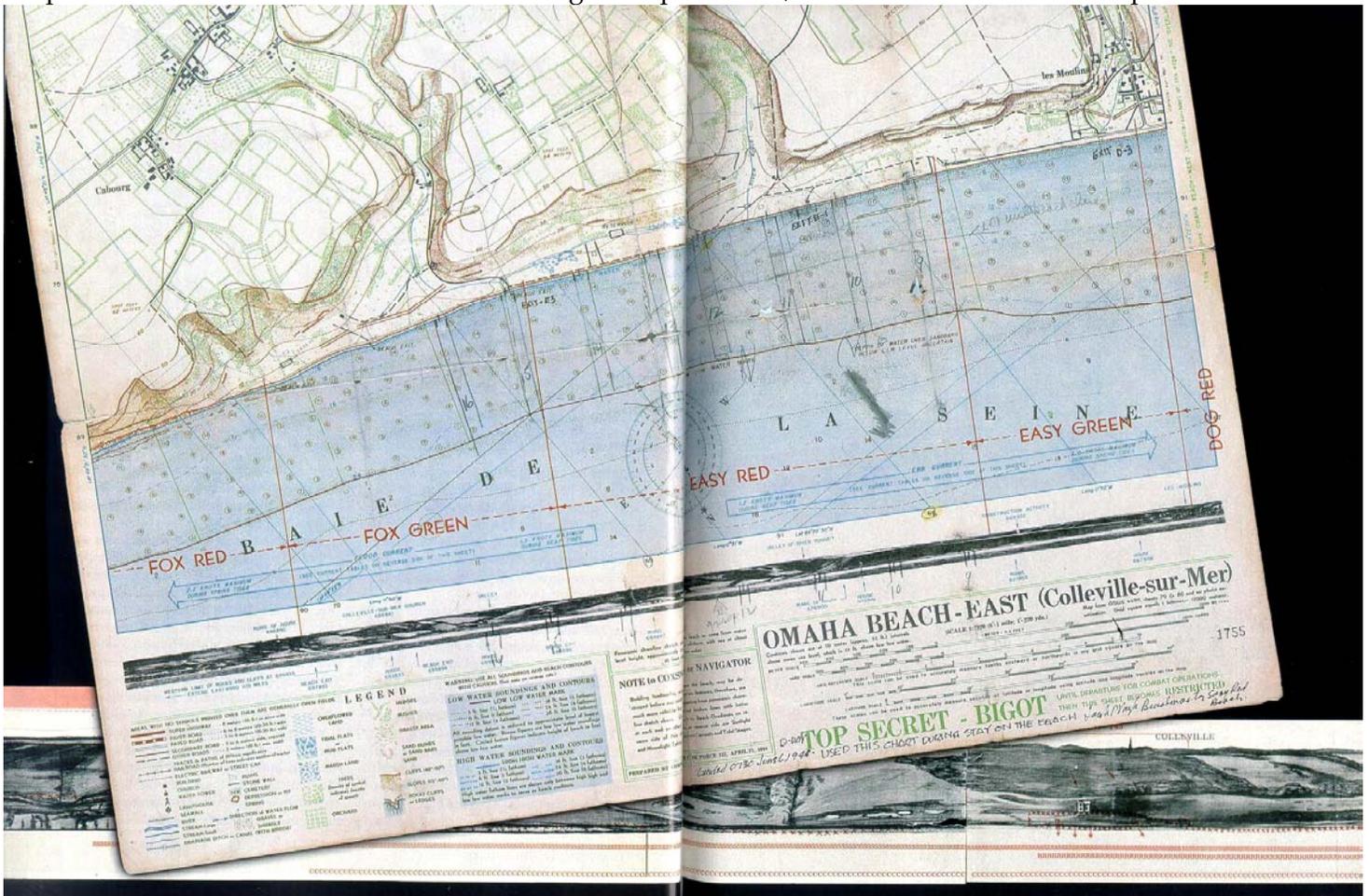
To discover what the Allied invaders faced, messages got to England in capsules, borne by American, British, and French operatives risked their lives—and sometimes gave their lives—in the process of filling in the BIGOT maps. Revelations about Normandy’s undulating seafloor came from frogmen who also got sand samples on

beaches patrolled by German sentries. Such BIGOT map notations as “antitank ditch around strongpoint” or “hedgehogs 30 to 35 feet apart” were often the gifts of French patriots. French laborers conscripted by the Nazis paced distances between obstacles or kept track of German troop movements. A housepainter, hired to redecorate German headquarters in Caen, stole a blueprint of Atlantic Wall fortifications.

French Resistance networks passed on precious bits of information, particularly the condition of bridges and canal locks. Wireless telegraph operators transmitted in bursts to evade German radio-detection teams. Other homing pigeons that the Royal Air Force had delivered to French Resistance agents in cages parachuted into German-occupied Normandy. Germans, aware of the winged spies, used marksmen and falcons to bring them down. But thousands of messages got through.

**BIGOT MAPS BEGAN** with information gleaned from old scenic postcards of the Normandy coast and charts from the Napoleonic era. Next came the special deliveries from the French Resistance. Then in mid-May 1944, BIGOT mapmakers asked for low-level aerial photos of the coast. Pilots trained to fly at 10,000 feet, called this wave-top flying “dicing” because they felt that in their unarmed and unarmored aircraft they were rolling the dice with death.

On May 6, Lt. Albert Lanker of the 31st Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron made the first dicing flight. Flying 30 feet above the Channel to slip under German radar, he turned sharply over a large dune on the Normandy coast and, at 360 mph, buzzed German soldiers working on defenses. Photo interpreters examined his photos and discovered that the dune was a gun emplacement, which was added to the maps.



Lt. Mien Keith, while zooming along at about 360 mph, hit a gull. The bird smashed through the windscreen but was stopped by newly installed bulletproof glass on brackets in front of the pilot. Spattered by blood and feathers, Keith could not see for a few seconds but wiped off his goggles and never lost control. Photos from another of the dicing missions, this one flown by Lt. Garland A. York, revealed log posts jammed in the sand, angled seaward and topped by mines. Other photos showed that the tidal flats of the beaches were studded with

“hedgehogs” – steel rails welded together and resembling giant versions of children’s jacks. The obstacles were designed to impale or rip open the hulls of landing craft approaching the beach at high tide.

Some air reconnaissance photographs were processed so fast that fingerprints still appear on the negatives, showing that they were snatched from the developer for circulation. “Recent wave-top aerial photo reconnaissance:’ says a May 29 intelligence bulletin, “reveals that practically all types of underwater obstacles may be armed with. . . mines.’ The dicing photos convinced planners that landing craft had to come in at low tide and discharge troops before hitting the obstacles. So mapmakers had to figure ways to display tides and beach slopes.

Head-on aerial photos of the Normandy shoreline made by the dicing flights produced eye-level views for Allied coxswains to use as they aimed their landing craft invasion almanac with information about sun, toward D-Day beaches. BIGOT artists turned the photos into paintings that showed landmarks, such as church steeples and seaside houses. One of these artists was Navy Lt. Frederick S. Wight, who later would be renowned in civilian life as a curator and historian of modern art in the U.S.

Another BIGOT artist was Navy Lt. William A. Bostick, who worked in a commandeered London apartment. He and other artists used the pilots’ panoramic photos “to make watercolors of the beaches as landing craft skippers would see them as they approached.” Bostick’s watercolors, emphasizing terrain features and landmarks, formed a narrow band under the maps. On the back of the maps was an invasion almanac with information about the sun, moon, tide, and currents from May 25 to June 21. (The precise date of the invasion was not set until after the maps were finished.)

Bostick was especially proud of an ingenious transparent overlay that showed profiles of large and small landing craft. By adjusting the sheet over a graph of the beach slope, navigators could see where their craft would run aground and what the water depth would be. “The Army called them maps and the Navy called them charts,’ Bostick said. “So we called them chart/maps – pieces of paper that showed the Navy where to land the Army.”

While the maps were evolving, a group of intelligence officers was busy crafting the greatest hoax of the war – a spy-running operation that was not fully revealed until the 1980s. Earlier in the war, British counterintelligence officers gave captured German spies a simple choice: Be hanged or work for us. Most chose to live. Directed by their handlers, the turncoats used seemingly clandestine radios to transmit to German spymasters a mix of real and counterfeit information. The operation, run by the wryly named XX (double cross) Committee, was meant to convince the German high command that the invasion would strike at either Nazi-held Norway or at Calais, across the English Channel from Dover.

Adding to the deception were two huge but imaginary military units. One, supposedly preparing to invade Norway, provided German radio interceptors with the busy radio traffic of a simulated 350,000-man army whose needs included “ski training’ and “handbooks on engine functioning in low temperatures.” A second phantom army appeared poised to strike at Calais under the command of Lt. Gen. Georges. Patton. Spies tipped the Germans that Patton had arrived in England to lead the Calais invasion. *Luftwaffe* reconnaissance flights photographed the evidence of Patton’s army: rows of tanks and barracks, fleets of landing craft in nearby ports, even an oil dock. All were illusions, made of wood, rubber, and papier-mâché by fakers who included movie stagehands.

**AN XX COMMITTEE OPERATIVE** added her contribution by reporting to the Germans that she was dating a staff officer of the nonexistent U.S. Fourteenth Army, which had moved its headquarters to the Dover area, opposite Calais, to prepare the invasion. (So complete was the deception that Fourteenth Army shoulder patches appeared alongside real ones in a 1944 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC booklet on U.S. armed forces insignia.)

But what about reports the Nazis were receiving of a Normandy invasion? That, said the Germans’ most trusted spy (and XX’s star performer) would only be a diversion. A message sent on June 9 – and read by Hitler

himself – warned that D-Day was a trap designed to draw off German reserves so that the Allies could launch a decisive attack, “probably. in the Pas de Calais area:’ The ruse would keep German forces in Calais for weeks after 1)-Day, awaiting the real” invasion.

While the Germans built up their forces around Calais, Field Marshal Rommel placed the underwater obstacles at Normandy that the dicers had spotted. Rommel had asked in vain for more cement and mines for Normandy. Denied, he made do with obstacles of timber and steel. “Our only possible chance will be at the beaches,” he said. If the invaders came to Normandy, he would stop them there. He expected them to come in on a high tide and impale their craft on his barriers.



By late May, Rommel’s men were in their bunkers overlooking the Normandy beaches, wondering if the invaders would land there – or hundreds of miles away. At *Widerstandsnest* (strongpoint) 62, overlooking what would be Omaha Beach. German troops were listening to popular music on a windup gramophone and reading letters by candlelight.

Sgt. Valentin Lehrmann learned that he had just become a father for the third time. The baby, Elfriede, was born May 26. Nearby, Pfc. Hem Severloh, the son of a farmer and at 21 a veteran of the Russian Front, brooded about his fate: “I knew if I did not kill them, they would kill me. All! wanted was to get out of this hell. All I wanted was to survive.’

Around the same time, invasion troops were pouring into sealed-off camouflaged camps on the English coast.

At a camp in Weymouth the King and Queen of England paid a surprise visit that took them among men of the Sixth Naval Beach Battalion, Joe Vaghi's outfit. Someone in the queen's party handed 17-year-old sailor Clyde Whirty an American flag, which he attached to the bulldozer, he was to use to clear paths on the Easy Red beachhead. When a buddy warned that the flag would draw German fire, Whirty, a thin, quiet-spoken man, shrugged and said~ "If they kill me, they won't kill someone else?"

On June 1 armed officer-messengers boarded the Allied vessels at the departure ports. Each commanding officer was handed a sealed envelope marked Top Secret. Inside was another sealed envelope. The Operation Neptune message inside revealed the date of D-Day: June 5, with a possible change to June 6 or 7. The message ended: "Destroy this by burning when you have read and understood."

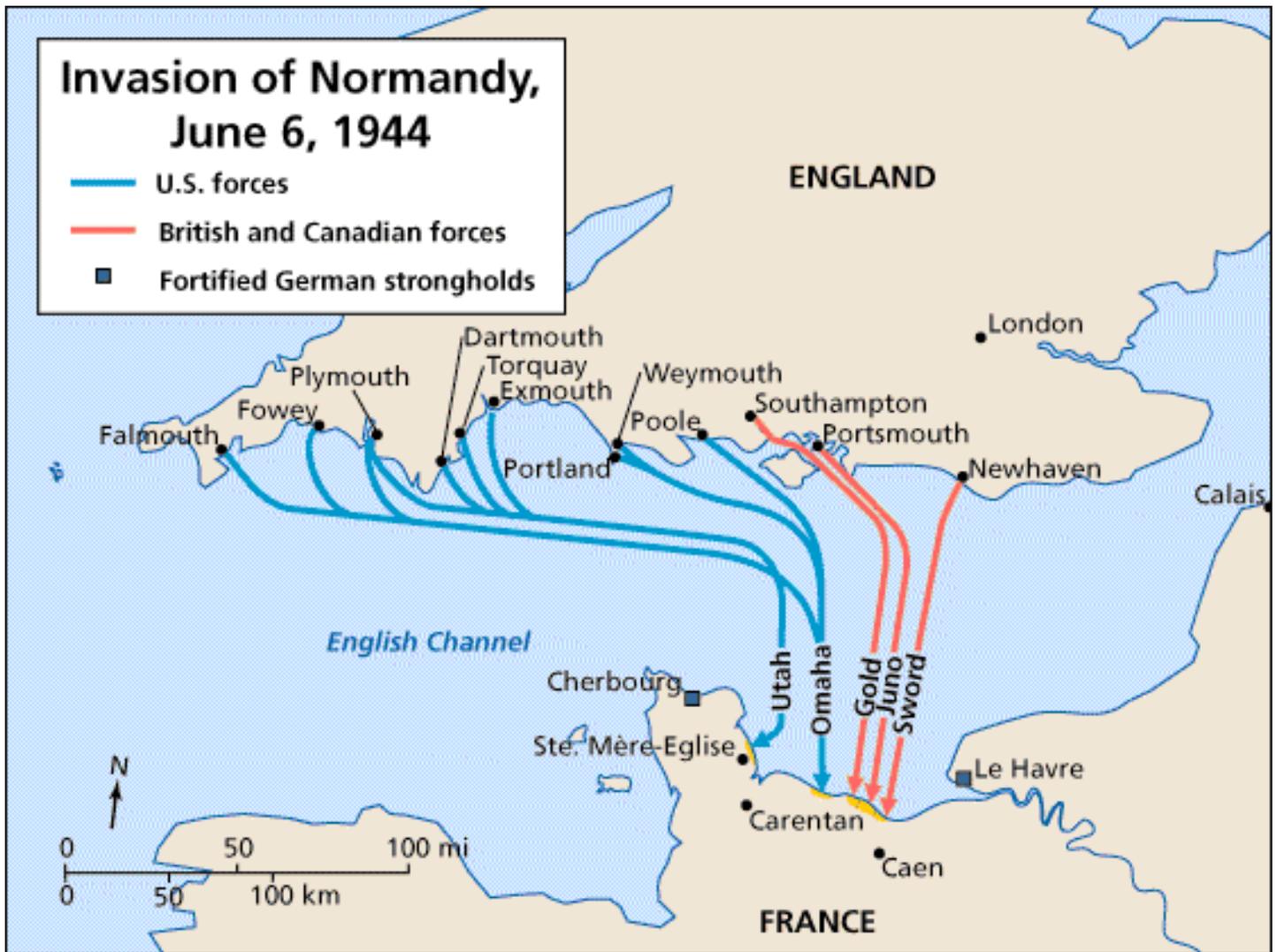
The weather was stormy on June 5. The next day the sea was choppy but the storm had passed. Soon after dawn on June 6, a fleet of Allied warships appeared in the steel gray fog off Normandy Beach and prepared to bombard the German fortifications detailed in the BIGOT map. Behind Utah Beach, German shore batteries fired first, some guns zeroing in on the U.S. destroyers *Fitch* and *Corry*. The ships were turning to starboard to line up parallel to the beach-They would then anchor to become steady gun platforms for the shore bombardment. At 6:10 am., exactly on schedule, Allied planes began laying smoke screens to bide the destroyers. But one of the planes was shot down before it could hide the *Corry*.

German guns immediately targeted the ship, which, while still firing, began twisting pas plumes of near misses. Then, a little after 6:30, she struck a mine. Eight minutes later, with the main deck underwater and the *Corry* breaking in half, the captain, Lt. Comdr. George Dewey Hoffman, ordered his 18 officers and 265 men to abandon ship. When all the living were in the 54-degree water, Hoffman joined them. The shelling continued, and more men died while struggling in the cold sea. By the time rescuing destroyers appeared two hours later, firing at Germans from one side of the ship while saving men on the other, the *Corry's* 260 survivors were near death. All told, the *Corry*, which had fired off 400 rounds during her few minutes of D-Day, lost 24 men. Her flag, snatched from the sinking ship by Lt. Paul Garray, still survives.

At about 7:30, the Sixth Naval Beach Battalion began to land on Omaha Beach, at a site their BIGOT maps designated as Easy Red sector. Clyde Whirty's bulldozer, the American flag flying, rolled off a landing craft and hit a mine. Clyde grabbed the flag, jumped off the wreck, and headed for another bulldozer, bursts landed, and when the small fountains whose driver had been shot in the head. Clyde removed the body and headed up the beach. When an artillery shell smashed that bulldozer, still clutching his flag, Clyde sprinted toward in abandoned bulldozer, got in, and drove off. By the end of the day, Clyde was on his fourth bulldozer and still doing his job—clearing the way for the infantry.

When landing craft 88 beached, Joe Vaghi was the second man down the ramp. The first was a Coast Guardsman in bathing trunks and a helmet. He jumped into the sea to string a Line for men to hold onto as they waded in. A German artillery shell hit him, and according to a witness he "disintegrated." Men of the Sixth Naval Beach Battalion—they called themselves "fighting sons of beaches"—began to charge down ramps lowered from both sides of the bow. Another German shell smashed into the starboard ramp, killing two more Coast Guardsmen.

German Pfc. Hem Severloh was crouching behind a machine gun at Widerstandsnest 62 and watching rows of men on the ramps of a landing craft. "My order: he recalls, "was to get them when they were still in one line, one after the other, before they started spreading. So I did not have to swing my gun sideways?" Severloh later wrote that he saw how the water sprayed up where my machine gun burst landed, and when the small fountains came closer to the GIs, they threw themselves down. . . . Very soon the first bodies were drifting in the waves of the rising tide. . . . In a short time, all GIs down there were shot."



SEVERLOH ESTIMATES that he fired 12,000 rounds from his machine gun and 400 from his carbine. But the Americans kept coming, and at the end of the day, Severloh surrendered, hoping the Americans would not know he was the German who had fired what was probably the deadliest machine gun on Omaha Beach. Sometime that day, Sgt. Valentin Lehrmann died gazing at a picture of his wife. By late afternoon Widerstandsnest 62 was empty) all its men dead, wounded, captured, or running for their lives.

In the sea, men also died. As another landing craft, 85, beached at Easy Red and struck a mine, German machine guns and artillery zeroed in. “The shells tore into the troop compartments. . . . They smashed through massed men trying to get down the ramp,” the captain later reported. Ablaze and riddled, she backed off the beach, carrying a cargo of dead and wounded. Her crew transferred all able-bodied survivors to other landing craft heading for Omaha. Her doctor helped with casualties, then boarded a boat for the beach to tend to those dying in the surf and on the sand.

What scenes we know on Bloody Omaha live on in the memories of men like Joe Vaghi—the brave but unsung troops who soldiered on and won the war, along with the forgotten sons of beaches who were both sailors and soldiers.

There is also the scene recorded by one of the BIGOT artists, Lt. William Bostick. On June 7, the day after, he walked the shore he’d seen for months in his imagination and watched soldiers digging temporary graves for bodies carried up from the sands. Then he drew one more sketch, a study in pen and ink that rendered the high price of human liberty. He titled it, ‘Burying the Dead on Omaha Beach.’